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In his discussion of romance in Anatomy of Criticism, Northrop Frye identifies the quest as the plot of romance. He postulates a mythic pattern of structure with four stages: (1) the agon or conflict, (2) the pathos or death-struggle, (3) the sparagmos or disappearance of the hero, and (4) the anagnorisis or reappearance and recognition of the hero. The first chapter of the thesis begins with a brief explanation of Frye's theory, which is followed by an analysis of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and Malory's "Tale of Gareth" according to Frye's terms. Although both romances do contain some of the elements suggested by Frye, in neither case does Frye's mythic pattern of structure account satisfactorily for the structure. As an alternative method of analysis, this study proposes that the events of the narrative are ordered, not by a pre-existing mythic formula, but by the author's preconceived idea of his story, which frequently involves the presentation of certain social, moral, or religious ideals.

The second and third chapters examine the quests in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and "The Tale of Gareth" to illustrate that the structure of each romance is determined by the author's intention. The Gawain poet is intensely concerned with the spiritual aspects of Gawain's quest. Throughout the romance, Gawain and the reader discover that the real tests Gawain must meet are measures of his inner attributes rather than of his physical ability against a definite, external foe. For Gawain, who early in the poem is identified as a seemingly ideal Christian

knight, the realization that he lacks the absolute purity attributed to him is a traumatic experience with ramifications for the entire court at Camelot.

In Malory's "Tale of Gareth," the advance of the young, unknown and untried knight to the ranks of the best knights of the world is a demonstration of the physical and spiritual attributes required for knighthood. In the adventures in which Gareth engages, he must exhibit progressively greater skill and moral virtue to gain recognition among the knights of Arthur's court and of the world. Through the events narrated, Gareth, the accomplished knight, is shown to be the fulfillment of the ideals set forth by the code of the Round Table.

The analysis of these two works suggests that, although there may be other influences, the author's idea of his story and his purpose in writing it are the primary factors in determining the structure of a given romance.

STRUCTURE AND MEANING OF THE QUEST IN

SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

AND MALORY'S "TALE OF GARETH"

by

Peggy Joyce McDaniel

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APPROVAL PAGE

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## CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

In his Anatomy of Criticism, Northrop Frye classifies literary forms under four archetypal categories--the comic, the romantic, the tragic, and the ironic. Each of these categories contains elements of the others, and together they reveal the general character of the society which creates them. As Frye notes, the nature of romance is determined by the search for a golden age, and its hero projects the ideals and dreams of the society as a whole. In discussing the genre of romance, Frye examines six phases which form "a cyclical sequence" in the hero's life. Beginning with the hero's birth, the cycle continues through his innocent youth, the quest, the victory of innocence over experience, a contemplative withdrawal from the world of experience, and the eventual acceptance of the contemplative life. The quest represents the most active period of the hero's life and shapes the entire romance. Frye's discussion concerns the complete form of the romance which Frye says is "clearly the successful quest." In defining romance, Frye writes that a romance occurs most frequently as

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<sup>1</sup>Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 198.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 187.



a sequence of minor adventures leading up to a major or climateric adventure, usually announced from the beginning, the completion of which rounds off the story. We call this major adventure, the element that gives literary form to the romance, the quest.<sup>3</sup>

Basically the quest forms the plot of the romance and is, in Frye's terminology, "a sequential and processional form."<sup>4</sup> In other words, the quest is generally a sequence of action, with each episode intrinsically related to the actions which precede and follow it. Developing his theory of romance further, Frye analyzes the quest motif in detail and formulates a mythic pattern of quest structure. Valuable as such an overview is, too rigid an insistence upon its authority may lead to a distorted interpretation of the quest which would reject certain works that legitimately belong in the romantic mode because they do not satisfy the classic myth formula of the quest. The central concern of this paper will be a study of the structure of the quests in two medieval romances, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and Malory's "Tale of Gareth." While both of these romances contain mythic elements, it is my contention that the primary determinant of structure is to be found in the author's intention in writing his story. In other words, the events of the narrative are ordered, not by a preexisting mythic formula, but by the author's conception of his story and his purpose in writing it, which most often is to illustrate certain social, moral,

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 186-187.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 186.

or religious ideals. The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to a discussion of Frye's theory of the structure of the romance quest and an analysis of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and "The Tale of Gareth" in light of Frye's system. Subsequent chapters will examine both of these romances in greater detail to demonstrate that the structure of each is based on the author's intention.

Frye begins his analysis of the romance quest by discussing three main stages:

- (1) the agon or conflict,
- (2) the pathos or death-struggle, and
- (3) the anagnorisis or recognition of the hero.<sup>5</sup>

Developing his analysis, Frye postulates an additional phase, the sparagmos or disappearance of the hero. Furthermore, Frye expands the anagnorisis to include the reappearance of the hero. Focusing on the dragon-killing theme as the central form of the romance quest, Frye proposes a representative quest is illustrated by the account of Jesus Christ, who in His defeat of Satan brings salvation to an enslaved people. Thus, in the typical quest, the hero is associated with spring, dawn, order, fertility, vigor, and youth. He is engaged in conflict with a sinister enemy, who is representative of the hero's opposites--winter, darkness, confusion, sterility, moribund life, and old age. Their battle illustrates the struggle between these opposing forces. Frye's first stage, the agon is characterized by the perilous journey

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<sup>5</sup>The material for the following discussion is taken from "The Mythos of Summer: Romance," Frye, pp. 186-206.

and preliminary minor adventures; it culminates in the pathos, the major battle between the hero and his antagonist, in which one or both die. The sparagmos, literally a tearing to pieces, occurs as a natural result of this struggle; the hero is assumed dead or is at least apparently lost to his comrades. In the anagnorisis, the hero returns triumphantly from his symbolic death and is honored for his deeds. Frequently, the hero is rewarded with a beautiful maiden and a kingdom. By the hero winning love, honor, fame, and fortune, the romance is brought to a happy, triumphant close.

The outstanding metrical romance of fourteenth century English literature, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight<sup>6</sup> is tightly structured. The antagonist is clearly indicated from the beginning, and the central focus always returns to Gawain's search for the Green Knight.<sup>7</sup> On the one hand, the Green Knight is identified with the characteristics Frye associates with the enemy--winter, darkness, confusion, sterility, moribund life, and old age. Both his appearances at Arthur's court and at the Green Chapel occur on New Year's Day during the coldest part of the year. The Green Chapel is described as a desolate place fit for the

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<sup>6</sup>Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, 2nd ed., ed. Norman Davis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967). All future references to the text of this poem are from this edition.

<sup>7</sup>An excellent essay exploring the place of myth in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is Charles Moorman's "Myth and Medieval Literature: Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Mediaeval Studies, 18 (1956), 158-172. A second article of some significance, although it has been generally discredited, is: John Speirs, "'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,'" Scrutiny, 16 (1949), 274-300.

devil to say his matins at midnight. The knight himself is pictured with long locks and a great beard, both of which could be indicative of old age. His astonishing dress and color throw Arthur's court into speechless confusion. However, on the other hand, his green color may be interpreted as the sign of a fertility god and the holly branch he carries (l. 206) as symbolic of peace.

Gawain's adventures occur when Arthur's court is in its youth, and Gawain is portrayed as the outstanding representative of the vigor and order of the Round Table. His quest is clearly defined from the beginning of the romance. He must find the Green Knight at the end of the year and receive a blow equal to the one he gives the Green Knight. Throughout the work, this quest is given the central focus. Gawain stops his search only long enough to observe Christmas, and, immediately after the festivities, declares his intention to undertake the quest once more.

In Sir Gawain, the most apparent of Frye's four stages is the agon. The appearance of the Green Knight at Camelot sets the stage for the romance. Accepting the Green Knight's challenge to exchange blows, Gawain beheads the unwelcome guest (ll. 421-429). To the amazement of Arthur's court, the Green Knight picks up his head, reminds Gawain of his agreement to meet him a year hence, and leaves the silent banquet hall. The narrative passes quickly over the greater part of the next year and continues with Gawain's search for the Green Knight. His is a perilous journey, full of foes, dangers, and hardships. Although few details are given, the poet creates a vivid picture of the perils Gawain faces.

Frye's second and third stages are not apparent in Sir Gawain. Neither of Gawain and the Green Knight's encounters may be considered a death-struggle. Both involve only an exchange of blows, and neither results in anyone's death. Since Gawain, the hero, does not disappear or die, there is no sparagmos, unless we consider Gawain's moral failure to represent a spiritual death, in the theological sense that man's sin results in a separation from God. However, such speculation may be presumptuous since Frye is concerned with the actual events of the romance and not with their symbolic significance.

The final stage, anagnorisis, or the reappearance and recognition of the hero, does appear in Sir Gawain. Gawain returns to Arthur's court where he is welcomed with great joy, and his badge of shame, the green girdle, becomes a badge of honor for the lords and ladies of the Round Table. However, the recognition is not complete. Gawain is not satisfied with his performance on the quest; he has failed where success is most important, in honor. Although he is as successful as any human being could hope to be, he realizes his imperfection and apparently recognizes that the praise of his peers does not cover his failures. Moreover, they do not take his quest seriously and regard his shame as a jest.

Although some features of Frye's scheme shed light on the structure of this romance, the complexity of Sir Gawain cannot be satisfactorily dealt with by using Frye's outline. Much space within the narrative is devoted to the scenes of the hunt, and the temptations, yet Frye offers little that can explain



them.<sup>8</sup> Since the decisive action of the romance occurs in the temptation episodes, the exchange of blows, the major encounter between the Green Knight and Gawain, cannot be classified under the dragon-killing theme which Frye calls the focus of the quest. Although Gawain is unsuccessful in passing the test represented by the girdle,<sup>9</sup> there is no hint that had he been successful he would have been rewarded with a lady, as Frye suggests the hero will. Neither does Gawain's adventure set his people free from a fearful monster or fate. Perhaps his experiences are to enlighten the members of the Round Table to the dangers of the chivalric code,<sup>10</sup> but the court laughs at Gawain's sense of failing and he alone appears alerted to the pitfalls of the system. Like the court's perception of Gawain's test, Frye's analysis of the quest

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<sup>8</sup>Frye, p. 187, notes the frequency of the number three in romance. In Sir Gawain, this occurrence is notable in the three days at Bertilak's castle in which he and Gawain agree to exchange trophies. On each of these three days, Bertilak and his attendants engage in a hunt while Gawain is tempted by the lady who on the third day kisses him three times.

<sup>9</sup>Gawain's failure raises the question of whether Sir Gawain should be evaluated by Frye's criteria since he defines the complete form of romance as "clearly the successful quest" (p. 187). However, by other standards the poem belongs to the genre of romance, and the high critical acclaim it has in this category sufficiently warrants its inclusion in this study.

<sup>10</sup>Among the critics who see Sir Gawain's quest as an effort to warn Arthur's court are: Derek W. Hughes, "The Problem of Reality in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," University of Toronto Quarterly, 40 (1971), 217-235, who sees Camelot as "an image of a civilization that has evolved away from Christian ideals and generated its own codes, glittering and attractive on the surface, but false analogues to Christian values rather than extensions of them" (p. 234); and S. S. Hussey, "Sir Gawain and Romance Writing," Studia Neophilologica, 40 (1968), 161-174, who believes Gawain is involved in a "questioning of traditional romance values" (p. 174).

does not provide the insights necessary to delve deeply into these experiences which are of significance chiefly on a spiritual level, rather than on a physical one. As will be shown in the next chapter, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a romance written with the purpose of focusing upon the moral or spiritual values of both the individual and society.

Like Sir Gawain, Malory's "Tale of Gareth"<sup>11</sup> demonstrates the efforts of one knight to uphold the chivalric virtues in his own life. Unlike Gawain, who has a well-established reputation, Gareth is the young, untried knight. The basic narrative fabric of the romance is Gareth's attempt to gain recognition as a worthy member of King Arthur's court. Although he engages in numerous conflicts, his major battle, the test for which the preceding ones prepare him, is against Ironsyde, the Red Knight of the Red Lands. Their encounter can not be considered an actual manifestation of the dragon-killing theme, although it is symbolic of it. Ironsyde has indeed done "passynge ylle and shamefully" (p. 200), but his deeds are less notorious because they have been done at the request of a lady. Ironsyde's life is without love or meaningful purpose. He lays seige to the castle of the lady Lyones apparently because he desires her to be his lady. Lyones, however, does not want his love, and Ironsyde later confesses his deeds have been done to avenge wrongs done to the brothers of a lady he once loved (p. 199).

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<sup>11</sup>Eugene Vinaver, ed., Malory: Works, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1971). All future references to "The Tale of Gareth" will be to this edition.

Instead of directly challenging the knights accused by that lady, Ironsyde has beseiged Lyones hoping that one of the accused knights will be among those coming to defend her. While Ironsyde has killed many worthy knights, he has yet to encounter any of the ones he desires. Except for the singleness of his purpose in destroying these knights, Ironsyde is not depicted as an evil person. He is portrayed as a vigorous man in the prime of his life and is considered among the best knights of the world.

The various episodes of the "Tale of Gareth" fit Frye's outline of quest structure very neatly. Before he encounters Ironsyde, Gareth experiences many preliminary adventures. Following his arrival at Arthur's court, he requests meat and drink for the coming year. At the end of the year which he spends as a kitchen knave, Gareth asks for and is granted the adventure of the damsel. Throughout the journey to the beseiged castle, the damsel abuses Gareth, belittling his achievements and denying his worth, but each of his opponents schools him in the code of knightly behavior and prepares him to fight Ironsyde. During their battle, a definite example of pathos, both knights at times seem near death. Gareth gains strength by the thought of Lyones' grief and is able to overcome Ironsyde. Rather than kill Ironsyde, Gareth restores him to the proper order of society by requiring him to ask forgiveness of Lyones and to submit himself to King Arthur. After his victory, Gareth expects to be richly received by Lyones. However, she refuses to admit him to her castle, saying that he must first gain recognition. Later she admits wanting only to know his family background. While this exile does not clearly equal the death of the hero, it does



approximate it. Malory writes that Beaumains [Gareth] "rode away-  
warde from the castle makynge grete dole. And so he rode now here,  
now there, he wyste nat whother, tyll hit was durke nyght" (p. 201).  
Even though Gareth and Lyones are soon reconciled, as far as Arthur  
and his knights are concerned, Gareth has disappeared. At Arthur's  
request, Lyones gives a tournament to lure Gareth to the court.  
Although he comes disguised, his identity is revealed and he is  
recognized as the outstanding knight of the tournament. Not yet  
ready to return to the court, Gareth slips away and engages in a  
series of minor adventures. The final episode of the romance, the  
celebration of Lyones and Gareth's marriage, brings the hero the  
ultimate recognition and reward, a bride.

Although Frye's outline of quest structure would appear to  
describe the plot of "The Tale of Gareth" from a mythic standpoint,  
his approach overlooks the central theme of Malory's tale, Gareth's  
two-fold quest of earning his family name and membership in the Round  
Table. According to Frye's terminology, the central episode of the  
romance should be Gareth's encounter with Ironsyde; however, this event  
is not the adventure unifying the tale. The common factor in each of  
Gareth's adventures is his effort to prove himself and to establish a  
reputation among the knights and ladies of the chivalric world, especially  
those of Arthur's court and his own family. The climax, the moment the  
entire romance anticipates, is not Gareth's victory over Ironsyde but  
Gawain's declaration that Gareth ranks with Lancelot among the knights  
of the Round Table (p. 222). This recognition removes Gareth and his  
quest from the tradition of the archetypal knight doing battle against

a sinister opponent to that of the Christian knight striving for an intangible reward of a moral or spiritual nature. The standard by which Gareth, unlike the Gawain of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, is measured and judges himself is a secular one, based upon other human beings, his brother Gawain and Lancelot, rather than one founded upon a spiritual ideal. While Gawain's goal is the unachievable moral and spiritual perfection of the ideal Christian knight, Gareth's quest involves him in the attainment of the secular attributes of knighthood, and with the completion of his quest, Gareth becomes the fulfillment of the ideal of the Round Table. The selection and ordering of the events in "The Tale of Gareth" are determined by the need to provide various encounters through which Gareth can demonstrate his prowess and his virtues and, thereby, illustrate that he is worthy of his family name and of membership in the knights of the Round Table.

Even from this brief discussion of these two romances, it is clear that Frye's analysis of the quest does not adequately explain all the intricacies of the medieval knight's adventures. However, as Frye himself demonstrates, his system is valid for certain romances, and, as has been shown above, various elements of his theory do clarify aspects of the romances in which his system does not entirely hold true. Although Frye's theory cannot be accepted as an absolute, it must be applied to individual romances to determine whether or not it is applicable in a particular case. The structure of some romances can vary considerably from the archetypal pattern according to the author's thematic intention. This approach does not invalidate Frye's thesis; it can either be an alternative to Frye's or it may supplement the one he suggests.

As the following chapters on Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and "The Tale of Gareth" will illustrate, the author of a romance may either depart from the archetypal pattern considerably or may impose moral, social, or religious significance to the archetypal pattern when he does employ it. In either case, the full significance of the structure can be discovered only by a consideration of the author's thematic intent as it is revealed in the work.

## CHAPTER II

SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT--IN

## SEARCH OF THE IDEAL KNIGHT

Most medieval romances emphasize the knight's skill as a warrior among a people who delighted in the pageantry and decorum of an established society. This emphasis is given due recognition by Northrop Frye's identification of a stage of preliminary adventures in the knight's quest. In Frye's system, these adventures often are a seemingly endless series of encounters between the hero and some foe, each episode differing only minutely from the ones preceding or following it, but all serving to illustrate the hero's finesse and courage and to prepare him for the culminating adventure. Frequently these introductory contests consume as much or more space in the narrative as the culminating adventure. In marked contrast, the central concern of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is Gawain's search for the Green Knight. The Gawain poet focuses on two closely interrelated adventures: the beheading episode between Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and Gawain's encounter with the lady of the castle. Structurally, as Donald R. Howard demonstrates, the two experiences have striking parallels which were designed to present the conflict between the worldly code of chivalry and the spiritual standards of Christianity.<sup>1</sup> The poet's

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<sup>1</sup>Donald R. Howard, "Structure and Symmetry in Sir Gawain," Speculum, 39 (1964), 430-433.

didactic intent is clearly evidenced in his treatment of the incidents, which reveal Gawain's inner virtue as well as his physical prowess. The Green Knight's challenge tests Gawain's physical courage and trustworthiness, and the temptation scenes measure his chastity and moral courage. Gawain's major struggle is not the fierce battle between the knight and a dragon (or possibly a knight embodying evil) that Frye says is the prototype of all knightly quests.<sup>2</sup> Instead, it is the deceptively innocent dalliance between Gawain and the lady of the castle occurring in Gawain's bed chamber. Moreover, the outcome of the exchange of blows depends on Gawain's performance in the test posed by the seduction attempt. Both adventures are intrinsically related and exemplify the ideals of physical and moral integrity expected in the model medieval knight. However, throughout the romance, situations and events are presented in a way that is deceiving to both Gawain and the reader. What appears significant on the surface is frequently found to be essentially unimportant, and what had at first seemed trivial assumes great importance. The Gawain poet employs irony based on the contrast of appearance and reality to convey the potential danger facing a person or society which places greater value on pleasure and physical prowess than on man's inner attributes. The irony is not totally dependent on the thematic scheme but also relies on the poet's treatment of events within the poem. The poet's focus on various aspects of Gawain's quest by his emphasis or inattention to them contributes to the poem's

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<sup>2</sup>Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 189.

ironic statement that even the finest individual or institution may contain imperfection which, if not corrected, will bring eventual destruction.

From the first mention of Gawain, he is portrayed as the "ideal feudal Christian knight . . . who sums up in his character the very best traits of all knights who ever lived."<sup>3</sup> Even Arthur's court where the narrative begins is, as Hussey observes,<sup>4</sup> described in superlative terms:

With all þe wele of þe worlde þay woned þer samen,  
 Þe most kyd knyȝtez vnder Krystes seluen,  
 And þe louelokkest ladies þat euer lif haden,  
 And he þe comlokest kyng þat þe court haldes . . .<sup>5</sup>

(With all the joy in the world they lived there together,  
 The most famous knights under Christ himself,  
 And the loveliest ladies that ever had life,  
 And he [Arthur] the comeliest king that ever held court . . .)<sup>6</sup>

In this unparalleled court, Gawain is introduced as the best and one of the highest ranking of Arthur's knights. His character exemplifies

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<sup>3</sup>Alan M. Markham, "The Meaning of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," PMLA, 72 (1957), 576.

<sup>4</sup>S. S. Hussey, "Sir Gawain and Romance Writing," Studia Neophilologica, 40 (1968), 161.

<sup>5</sup>Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, 2nd ed., ed. Norman Davis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), ll. 50-53. All future references to the text of Sir Gawain are from this edition.

<sup>6</sup>The translation and all later ones are my own. Aiding my interpretation have been the notes to the Tolkien and Gordon edition; a Modern English verse version in John Gardner, The Complete Works of the Gawain Poet (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), pp. 221-324; and a prose translation by George K. Anderson in George K. Anderson and William E. Buckler, eds., The Literature of England, I, 5th ed., (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1958), 196-229.



the chivalric and Christian virtues expected from a noble knight--  
valor, piety, and courtesy.

There gode Gawan watz grayped Gwenore bisyde,  
And Agravayn a la dure mayn on þat oþer syde sittes,  
Boþe þe kynges sistersunes and ful sike kniȝtes . . .<sup>7</sup>

(There good Gawain was sitting beside Guinivere,  
And Agravain of the hard hand was sitting on the other side,  
Both sons of the king's sisters and full courageous knights . . .  
[ll. 109-111])

Nonetheless, he is a likeable person who has the respect and admiration of his comrades. Gawain is pictured as an exceptionally brave and courteous knight, but he is not set apart from the other knights by what Burrows calls "any signs of mysterious election."<sup>8</sup> He is not chosen to contend with the Green Knight because of his extraordinary qualities, rather, as one critic notes, he volunteers to take the king's place as a matter of honor.<sup>9</sup> His offer is presented in the most courteous language and allows Arthur to withdraw gracefully from a conflict which Hussey suggests is too ridiculous a matter to concern the king.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>As indicated by Tolkien, *Sir Gawain*, pp. 76-78, note to l. 109, tradition in Continental and British romances presented Gawain "as the greatest of Arthur's knights, famed for his courtesy as well as invincible in battle." A second tradition emerged in the romances in which Gawain was not the central figure. Although he retained his reputation for courtesy, he was no longer as chaste or as invulnerable in arms as in the earlier romances.

The Gawain poet held the earlier idea of Gawain as is indicated in the lengthy passage describing his preparation for the quest (ll. 566-669).

<sup>8</sup>J. A. Burrow, *A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965), p. 12.

<sup>9</sup>R. A. Waldron, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p. 10.

<sup>10</sup>Hussey, p. 166.

Gawan, þat sate bi þe quene,  
 To þe kyng he can enclyne:  
 'I beseche now with saʒez sene  
 Þis melly mot be myne.

'Wolde ʒe, worþilych lorde,' quoth Wawan to þe kyng,  
 'Bid me boʒe fro þis benche, and stonde by yow þere,  
 Þat I wythoute vylanye myʒt voyde þis table,  
 And þat my legge lady lyked not ille,  
 I wolde com to your counseyl bifore your cort ryche.  
 For me þink hit not semly, as hit is soþ knawen,  
 Per such an askyng is heuened so hyʒe in your sale,  
 Þaʒ ʒe ʒoursel be talenttyf, to take hit to yourseluen,  
 Whil mony so bolde you about vpon bench sytten,  
 Þat vnder heven I hope non hazerer of wylle,  
 Ne better bodyes on bent þer baret is rered.  
 I am þe wakkest, I wot, and of wyt feblest,  
 And lest lur of my lyf, quo laytes þe soþe--  
 Bot for as much as ʒe ar myn em I am only to prayse,  
 No bounte bot your blod I in my bode knowe;  
 And syþen þis note is so nys þat noʒt hit yow falles,  
 And I haue frayned hit at yow fyrst, foldez hit to me;  
 And if I carp not comlyly, let alle þis cort rych  
 bout blame.'

Ryche togeder con roun,  
 And syþen þay redden alle same  
 To ryd þe kyng wyth croun,  
 And gif Gawan þe game.

(Then Gawain, who sat by the queen,  
 Bowed to the king,  
 'I beseech you now of a truth  
 That this contest might be mine.

'Would you, honored lord,' quoth Gawain to the king,  
 'Bid me rise from this bench, and stand by you there,  
 That I might without bad manners leave this table  
 And not displease my leige lady,  
 I would come to advise you before your court.  
 For I think it is unseemly, if the truth be known,  
 That such a request is raised so publicly in your hall,  
 Though you yourself be desirous to take it upon yourself,  
 While so many bold men sit about you at the table,  
 I think no men under heaven are readier in spirit  
 Or better in fighting where battle is raised.  
 I am the weakest, I know, and in wit the feeblest,  
 And less would be the loss of my life, if the truth were told--  
 Only because you are my uncle am I praiseworthy,  
 I know no virtue in my body except your blood,  
 And since this business is so foolish, by no means is it right for you,  
 And since I have asked it of you first, it befits me;



And if I speak ungraciously, let this rich court  
     be entirely without blame.'  
 The nobles did take whispered counsel together,  
 And then all advised the same  
 To relieve the crowned king of the contest  
 And to give Gawain the game. [ll. 339-365])

Having undertaken the challenge, Gawain is obligated to fulfill the terms of the agreement. Although Gawain alone assumes the challenge, he becomes a representative not only of King Arthur but of the entire court. When Gawain replaces Arthur, Gawain and the Green Knight repeat the original contract, and the Green Knight requires Gawain further to vow that he will seek the Green Knight wherever he is to be found. This additional requirement presents another test for the younger knight; he must prove himself--not only as a courageous man physically able to exchange blows but also as a trustworthy man who will keep his word whatever the cost. The challenge and the quest represent a trial of the human and spiritual virtues Gawain possesses as a Christian knight. Each episode of his adventures poses a test of these traits in Gawain's character.

Gawain's armor and attitude as he prepares for his rendezvous with the Green Knight emphasize his qualifications as a superior Christian and chivalric knight. Although each part of his equipment is selected with utmost care, his shield, colored a brilliant red with a golden pentangle painted on it is the outstanding feature. The poet digresses from the narrative to demonstrate that the pentangle, an ancient symbol of truth, is a fitting emblem for Gawain who embodies the best of all knightly virtues. As he sets out on his seemingly hopeless quest, there is much sorrow among his friends. Gawain though is fearless, saying, "Quat schuld I wonde?/ Of destines derf and dere/

What may mon do bot fonde?" ("What should I fear?/ Of destinies dark and drear/ What may man do but try?" [11.563-565]) True to the expected behavior of a trustworthy knight, he has given his word and is determined to keep the appointment. Gawain demonstrates that even in an apparently hopeless situation man must continue to put forth his best effort. In explaining his unseasonal journey to Bertilak later, Gawain vows, "And me als fayn to falle feye as fayly of my ernde" ("And I as fain would fall dead as fail of my errand" [1.1067]).

During the long and arduous search for the knight of the Green Chapel, the temptation to return to the comforts and friends at Camelot would have conquered a lesser man, but Gawain remains firm in his determination to locate the Green Knight. Although the real dangers do not  
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begin until Gawain crosses the Dee, he faces hardships from the time he leaves the court. The harsh reality of the journey contrasts sharply with the warmth and celebrations at Camelot. Gawain travels alone with only his horse and God to share his troubles. Passing through uncivilized regions, he has none of the comforts or pleasures to which he has been accustomed. Gawain's behavior demonstrates for the reader that his reputation is the result of inner virtue. His performance here where no one is present to judge or encourage him shows that he is no hypocrite and the qualities he professes are deeply ingrained in his being.

The country through which Gawain travels is a place "from which God (originally perhaps the god) appears to have withdrawn, a landscape

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<sup>11</sup>A detailed description and analysis and summary of differing opinions concerning the geography of Sir Gawain's journey may be found in the Tolkien and Gordon edition, note to l. 691 ff., pp. 97-98; also Burrow, p. 51.

desolate of humans, inhabited by unhuman creatures, beasts, and monsters  
 against which Gawain must hazard his life."<sup>12</sup> The farther north Gawain  
 travels the more forsaken the land becomes. Among the inhabitants are  
 "bot lyte/ þat aþer God oþer gome wyth goud hert louied" (but few that  
 either God or man with good heart loved [ll. 701-702]). Benson asserts  
 that in search of the Green Knight Gawain finds only hardship and not  
 the high adventure so prized by romance knights.<sup>13</sup> However, the text  
 presents a picture of Gawain successfully encountering many marvelous  
 foes.

At vche warþe oþer water þer þe wyȝe passed  
 He fonde a foo hym byfore, bot ferly hit were,  
 And þat so foule and so felle þat fezt hym byhode.  
 So many meruayl bi mount þer þe mon fyndez,  
 Hit were to tore for to telle of þe tenþe dole.  
 Sumwhyle wyth wormez he werrez, and with wolues als,  
 Sumwhyle wyth wodwos, þat woned in þe knarrez,  
 Boþe wyth bullez and berez, and borez oþerquyle,  
 And etayneȝ, þat hym aneledede of þe heȝe felle;  
 Nade he benduȝty and dryȝe, and Dryȝtyn had serued,  
 Douteles he had ben ded and dreped ful ofte.

(At each ford and stream that the knight passed  
 He found a foe before him, unless it were unusual,  
 And that so evil and so fierce that he was obliged to fight it.  
 He found many marvels in those mountains,  
 It would be too difficult to tell a tenth part.  
 Sometimes with dragons he fought, and also with wolves,  
 Sometimes with satyrs, that lived in the ragged rocks,  
 Both with bulls and bears, and boars at other times,  
 And giants, that pursued him on the high rocks;  
 Had he not been doughty and sturdy, and served God,  
 Doubtless he would have been dead and slain full often.  
 [11.715-725])

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<sup>12</sup>John Speirs, "'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,'" Scrutiny,  
 16 (1949), 286.

<sup>13</sup>Larry D. Benson, Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green  
 Knight (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1965), p. 108.

Unlike most medieval romance poets, the author of Sir Gawain chose to minimize these adventures and to concentrate almost entirely on the central quest, the search for the Green Knight. The preliminary adventures of the knight errant as Frye describes them are narrated in a straightforward manner and demonstrate the knight's readiness for the climactic adventure which is similar to the earlier ones, but greater. Adventures like these, the Gawain poet implies, are the expectation of a medieval knight. Gawain, although he often comes near death, combats these opponents without unusual effort.

For Gawain, these physical tests are deceptive, because his real struggle here is not against the obvious foes but against hardships caused by natural forces. Gawain can dismiss the beasts and monsters he encounters as elements of his normal world, but the cold and intense suffering caused by the harsh weather are unaccustomed perils. Focusing on Gawain, his movements, and his perceptions, the author emphasizes that the most frightening dangers for Gawain are those which loom largest in his mind, not those which offer a definite physical, external challenge to him. Thus, the weather which for most romance writers and their heroes would seem an insignificant aspect of a quest, especially in comparison to the hero's fierce opponents, assumes immense importance for Gawain. Although his suffering from the cold seems only a minor detail, it gives a foreboding of the danger which will face him later. Ironically, his severest struggle in search of the Green Knight is against the forces of the weather and not against the ferocious foes he meets. In the same way, the decisive moment of the quest comes when

Gawain least expects it--in the flirtation with the lady of the castle--and not in the long-awaited encounter with the Green Knight.

The appearance of the castle marks a suspension of Gawain's winter hardships, but, as with his recent adventures, the dangers which threaten him most are, as Fox notes, not the most obvious ones but rather those which appear least important.<sup>14</sup> Taylor asserts that Gawain does not know for what he is looking nor where he can expect to find it.<sup>15</sup> Not realizing who his real enemies are, he falls prey to his own pride and love of life. One critic has even said that Gawain's enemy is in fact himself.<sup>16</sup> Bertilak's castle, where Gawain observes Christmas, is "þe comlokest þat euer knyzt azte" (the comeliest that ever a knight saw [l. 767]), and the court's festive life contrasts sharply with the isolation and misery of Gawain's journey since leaving Camelot. To all outward appearances, Gawain can now forget the difficulties he has had and put aside for a brief time the mission he is on. Little does he suspect that he is being tested when he accepts Bertilak's offer to exchange trophies, much less that his actions on the three days he remains at the castle while Bertilak hunts will determine the outcome of his meeting with the Green Knight. Each day

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<sup>14</sup>Denton Fox, ed., Twentieth Century Interpretations of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), p. 11.

<sup>15</sup>P. B. Taylor, "'Blysse and Blunder,' Nature and Ritual in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," English Studies, 50 (1969), 169.

<sup>16</sup>Gordon M. Shedd, "Knight in Tarnished Armour: The Meaning of 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,'" Modern Language Review, 62 (1967), 11.



Bertilak's lady visits Gawain in his bedchamber and on her departure kisses him, and each evening Gawain bestows on Bertilak the same number of kisses he had received. On the third day, Gawain has an additional gift, a magical girdle, and he chooses to withhold it. His decision is not out of regard for its monetary worth or its value as a memento of the lady's affection. He elects to keep the belt because its supernatural power of protecting its wearer from physical harm offers a seemingly acceptable avenue of escape, a means of fulfilling his agreement with the Green Knight while saving his life.

The first portion of the journey from Camelot to Bertilak's castle primarily tried Gawain physically; its continuation from Bertilak's castle to the Green Chapel is a challenge of Gawain's moral and spiritual values.<sup>17</sup> Setting out from Camelot, Gawain was tested by dangers from beasts, giants, cold, and rigorous conditions. Although the landscape and weather echo that of the earlier route (ll. 2077-2086), the journey from Bertilak's castle presents an ordeal of a different kind. Gawain now has a companion to direct him to the Green Chapel; however, with seemingly good intentions, this comrade tempts Gawain to flee from the dreadful fate awaiting him at the chapel. Benson indicates that the situation for Gawain is similar to the one the lady of the castle created when she offered him the magical girdle. In agreeing to conceal her gift, he broke the agreement with the lord by entering into one with her; in accepting the guide's proposal, Gawain would cancel his original

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<sup>17</sup>Donald Howard's essay "Structure and Symmetry in Sir Gawain" provides a detailed analysis of the two segments of Gawain's travels which Howard considers to form parallel sequences.

contract with the Green Knight and form a new one with the guide. Both propositions offer Gawain the opportunity to save his life while falsely retaining the appearance of true knighthood.<sup>18</sup>

The meaning of Gawain's encounter with the Green Knight is a much debated topic. The description of the approach to the chapel, taken with Gawain's initial impression--"Wel bisemez þe wyȝe wruxled in grene/ Dele here his deucioun on þe deulez wyse" (It well becomes the knight clad in green/ To perform here his devotions in the Devil's manner [ll. 2191-2192])--has led some critics to consider the quest a passage to the underworld and the meeting with the Green Knight an encounter with the Devil.<sup>19</sup> However, the Green Knight does not appear to be an evil being. He seems more a benevolent judge requiring retribution (the nick on Gawain's neck) but understanding the failure and placing it in a better perspective than Gawain himself does.

The much anticipated moment of Gawain's encounter with the Green Knight brings an unforeseen climax and several unexpected revelations as to the purpose of the quest. On Gawain's arrival at the Green Chapel, the Green Knight commends him for his trustworthiness in keeping the appointment, and Gawain bravely and rather impatiently announces his readiness to receive the blow that is his due. However, as he

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<sup>18</sup>Benson, pp. 228-229.

<sup>19</sup>See, for example: Bernard S. Levy, "Gawain's Spiritual Journey: Imitatio Christi in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Annuaire Mediaevale, 6 (1965), 101; and Stephen Manning, "A Psychological Interpretation of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" in Donald R. Howard and Christian Zacher, eds., Critical Studies of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p. 284.

glimpses the mighty axe descending toward his neck, he instinctively flinches. His action leads the Green Knight to question his identity --surely the famed Gawain would not shrink in fear even before he feels any hurt. Again the Green Knight prepares to attack Gawain, and, although Gawain stands firm, the Green Knight does not carry through, saying he is testing Gawain's courage. The third time the Green Knight raises the axe, he strikes Gawain but only slightly breaks the skin. Overjoyed because the stroke has fulfilled his agreement, Gawain quickly declares his intention to defend himself against further attacks. Pleased by Gawain's courage, the Green Knight declares the terms of their covenant fulfilled. Not only has the blow satisfied their agreement at Arthur's court, but, as the Green Knight reveals, the three strokes have also rewarded Gawain for his conduct with the lady of the castle. Since Gawain faithfully returned to the lord all that he had received on the first two days, the Green Knight intentionally missed Gawain twice. However, in retribution for his deceit on the third day, the third stroke nicked the back of his neck. Identifying himself as Bertilak and the lord of the castle, the Green Knight explains that his earlier visit to Arthur's court was planned by the enchantress Morgan le Fay, Arthur's half-sister, with the purpose of seeing if the Round Table truly deserved its reputation and also to frighten the court, especially Guinivere, hoping she would die from the shock of seeing the headless green knight. These discoveries do not lessen Gawain's feelings of failure, and he refuses Bertilak's invitation to return home with him. Thus, the author introduces a final irony: that the testing of Gawain, supremely important to the knight (and to the reader, who



sympathizes with him), was only an unintended side effect of an intrigue against Arthur and his queen.

Deeply conscious of his "faut and þe fayntyse of þe flesche crabbed" (fault and faintness of the crabbed flesh [l. 2435]), Gawain turns back to Arthur's court, making the adventure a closed circuit beginning and ending at Camelot.<sup>20</sup> Like the earlier journeys, the return is over wild and rough country. As before, Gawain performs many heroic deeds along the way, but the poet again dismisses them from his immediate consideration. The poet's concern is not the conquering hero depicted in the mythic pattern Frye establishes but instead the sorrowful knight who has had to admit he is not the virtuous knight he and his fellows thought. By breaking his agreement with Bertilak and keeping the girdle to save his own life, Gawain has failed to live up to either the chivalric or Christian codes of behavior.

In contrast to the usual glorious homecoming of the victorious knight errant described by Frye, Gawain arrives at Camelot confessing his shame and wearing the emblem of his failure, the green baldric. Although he is overwhelmed by guilt, the lords and ladies dismiss his fault as a minor flaw which does not destroy their high opinion of him. To them, he remains "gode Gawayn" (l. 2491), the same expression with which the poet introduced him (l. 109). The court does not distinguish between Gawain's adventure in which the chief test is of moral integrity and the usual chivalric venture requiring primarily extraordinary

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<sup>20</sup>Burrow, p. 152.

prowess and courage. Thus, the lords and ladies are unable to understand Gawain's sense of failing. They joyously welcome him as they would any returning hero. To show their love and admiration for this near-perfect knight, they adopt the token of his error, which would have set him apart from them, to be a badge of honor for the Round Table worn "for sake of þat segge" (for sake of that knight [l. 2518]).<sup>21</sup> Unknowingly perhaps following the lead of the Green Knight, the court continue to regard Gawain as the best of all earthly knights. Gawain alone views his endeavor in a more spiritual perspective and sees the immense implications of his failure.

Because of the centrality of Gawain's quest to the poem, many critics have commented on its meaning. Charles Moorman advances a mythic interpretation of it as belonging to the basic pattern of journey-initiation-quest, which is alternately expressed as death-rebirth or initiation-withdrawal-return. He considers Gawain's quest a "rite de passage by which Gawain is initiated into a full understanding both of himself and of the values by which he lives and, by way of that knowledge (to return to the terms of the poem), to an understanding of the true nature of the chivalry of Arthur's court."<sup>22</sup> More common, however, are interpretations which explore the significance

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<sup>21</sup>A. C. Spearing, The Gawain-Poet: A Critical Study (Cambridge: University Press, 1970), p. 230, states that the court's wearing of the girdle prevents Gawain "from being the outstanding figure he wishes to be."

<sup>22</sup>Charles Moorman, "Myth and Medieval Literature: Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Medieval Studies, 18 (1956), 165.

of the quest from a Christian viewpoint. Since winter and the wintry journey were traditional occasions for penance in medieval literature,<sup>23</sup> Gawain's adventure may be explained as the pilgrimage of the human soul, where Gawain personifies the soul, and the Green Knight, the Word of God or Christ, who requires the soul to face the consequences of sin yet provides a means of grace.<sup>24</sup> Gardner advances a similar theory but proposes that Gawain is representative of Christ, Arthur's court of the higher court of God, and that Gawain's journey is an excursion into fallen nature. Thus, the implied contrast between Christ and Gawain "glorifies Christ's success and underscores man's needs for grace."<sup>25</sup> Levy theorizes that the quest is an imitation of Christ, based on His life in the scheme of redemption. He sees a pattern of the spiritual journey each man must make for himself--a necessary forsaking of the citadel of self-complacency, a wandering through a spiritual void--a desert, a wasteland, or wilderness, a confrontation with the Devil, and a return to the original place of departure with a renewed integrity.<sup>26</sup> A related interpretation is based on the idea of the moral journey (a "passage moralisé") in which the knight or soldier of Christ (a "miles

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<sup>23</sup>Burrow, p. 53.

<sup>24</sup>Larry S. Champion, "Grace Versus Merit in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Modern Language Quarterly, 28 (1967), 44.

<sup>25</sup>Gardner, p. 79.

<sup>26</sup>Levy, p. 73.

Christi") by imitating Christ aspires toward perfection, an ideal to be sought in this life, but which can be attained only in another.<sup>27</sup>

Whether one applies a mythic or Christian doctrinal approach, common to each of the interpretations is the idea that Gawain's quest involves him in an effort to attain perfection. Of all Arthur's knights, he comes nearest to the ideal, yet he is not able to maintain the absolute purity necessary to be the paragon of virtue represented by the pentangle. One critic sees in Sir Gawain a total reversal of the normal romance pattern in which perfection is the goal. He argues that Gawain starts as the perfect knight and moves downward, thereby becoming the object of laughter rather than admiration.<sup>28</sup> However, Bertilak and the court do not laugh at Gawain scornfully, and all Gawain's peers would agree with Bertilak's evaluation: ". . . and sothly me þynkkez/ On þe faultlest freke þat ever on fote þede;/ As perle bi þe quite pese is of prys more,/ So is Gawayn, in god fayth, bi oþer gay knyȝtez" (and truly I think/ The most faultless knight that ever went on foot;/ As a pearl by the white pea is of more value,/ So is Gawain, in good faith, by other fair knights [ll. 2362-2365]). Even in failure Gawain fares better than the majority of men. He has overcome countless foes, survived uncommon cold and hardships, courteously resisted the advances of his host's wife, and refused to flee

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<sup>27</sup> Richard Hamilton Green, "Gawain's Shield and the Quest for Perfection," ELH, 29 (1962), 122.

<sup>28</sup> Benson, pp. 242-243.

from certain death; his one fault is that he loved his life and wanted to save it. Not recognizing the magnitude of his failing, essentially the sin of self-pride, his friends fail to understand why Gawain believes himself dishonored by this very human fault of wanting to live. For them, it is not a weakness but an accepted norm of human behavior. Even the Green Knight does not see Gawain's error as being one of excessive wrong, telling him "Bot for 3e lufed your lyf; þe lasse I yow blame" (Only because you loved your life; the less I blame you [l. 2368]). However, although he has successfully met every test except one, Gawain realizes that the single slip affects all aspects of his character. That he has survived the adventure spiritually and physically is suggested by the natural healing of his wound, a fact noted by Burrow;<sup>29</sup> nevertheless, Gawain is not the same man he was. Others may still call him the most courteous and the best of Arthur's knights, but Gawain himself is aware that he does not deserve that reputation and, furthermore, never will. Although some critics have felt that Gawain's manner in telling the adventure indicates he is sadder without being wiser,<sup>30</sup> he is compelled to share his story--not from pride or a false sense of modesty, but because the experience has been a momentous event in his life. Events of this nature are not fully understood or come to terms with easily. Gawain has a new perspective

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<sup>29</sup>Burrow, p. 149.

<sup>30</sup>Spearing, p. 230.

through which he must view himself and the world. He has discovered that the values of the greatest importance are based on a standard reflecting internal virtues rather than external appearances. Gawain has returned home yet his journey has not really ended. He will always be pondering this discovery that the ideal is higher than he can hope to attain and even the standard by which he must act and be judged is above his comprehension.

Gawain has become a more thoughtful person, aware of the need to weigh the consequences of even the most insignificant actions, but the members of the court continue to delight in the carefree celebrations at Camelot and do not realize the brilliance of their life is not an indication of its moral worth. Morgan le Fay, Bertilak says, had arranged the Green Knight's visit to Camelot to reveal the superficiality of Arthur's lords and ladies. Although her plan has failed to bring the results she desired, neither is Gawain's performance a complete success. Pride, Gawain's weakness, is shared by the entire court and will eventually lead to Mordred's treachery and Guinivere and Lancelot's deceit, events which will result in the downfall of the Round Table. In Gawain's failure to live up to the ideal and the court's refusal to lay aside its youthful amusements to contemplate the serious implications of Gawain's venture, the Gawain poet shows the seeds of the pride and blind folly that will destroy the knights of the Round Table in the years to come.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>This evaluation of the significance of Gawain's endeavors was influenced by my reading of Burrow, who sees the experience as representative of the recurrent "cycle of social living, alienation, self-discovery, desolation, recovery and restoration" (p. 186).



In spite of his failure, "gode Gawayn" remains for us and the Gawain poet a model of behavior to which the ordinary man can compare himself. Time and again the Gawain poet demonstrates man must look beyond the surface qualities of his experience and discover the deeper truths that provide the key to real success. From our reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, it is apparent that the poet's selection and treatment of events are intended to emphasize the moral and spiritual values of Gawain and the court. His purpose is clearly evident in his technique of minimizing or giving ironic implications to aspects of the quest which are vital in Frye's mythic pattern. When the poet does turn his attention to these events, it is often to provide a contrast between what is generally expected and what happens for Gawain. In Gawain's case, the quest is principally a testing of inner qualities rather than the physical tests found in Frye's study. So often in his adventures, Gawain has seen that the greatest dangers have lurked where he least expects them. Unlike his peers, Gawain realizes the folly of reveling in the glitter and glory of the chivalric life. The final significance of Gawain's quest is found when the expedition is viewed in the overall realm of human endeavor. His performing "the unnatural and apparently absurd action of going into a dead land, in a dead season to seek his own death, is in fact asserting the possibility of meaningful human action and of an enduring civilization."<sup>32</sup> Thus, in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, the poet states through the quest

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<sup>32</sup>Fox, p. 9.

and the entire poem the necessity of striving toward the goal of the ideal, however remote or unattainable it may seem. The effort becomes an affirmation of life, a declaration that the rewards this world offers often mean less than the inner knowledge that comes from the struggle to achieve the prize.

<sup>1</sup>Larry B. Brown, "In *Northward*," in L. B. Brown and  
Herbert Baker, eds., *Critical Approaches to the Major English Works*  
*Selected through Perseus Ltd* (Ithaca: University of Pennsylvania  
Press, 1958), p. 115.

<sup>2</sup>Samuel Baker, *Sir Thomas Malory* (New York: Twayne Publishers,  
Inc., 1962), p. 100.

<sup>3</sup>Charles K. Brown, "Chaucer's Love in *Malory*," *ESQ*, 17 (1950), 109.



## CHAPTER III

## GARETH--THE TRAGIC VICTIM OF CHIVALRY

While Gareth is one of the lesser known of Arthur's knights and his story one of the least familiar sections of the Morte Darthur, "The Tale of Gareth" merits extensive study not only as the account of a young man proving his worth as a knight but also as an integral part of Malory's total work. Both approaches have been considered peripherally in previous criticism. Critical thought concerning "The Tale of Gareth" can be grouped along four different lines as represented by the following critics. Larry D. Benson views the tale as "the education and vindication of the 'Fair Unknown.'"<sup>1</sup> Edmund Reiss interprets Gareth's story as another of Malory's presentations of the ideal knight, dealing with the question of whether true nobility is passively inherited or actively achieved.<sup>2</sup> Charles Moorman, on the other hand, believes the tale is "a commentary upon love and the behavior of lovers,"<sup>3</sup> presenting a contrast to the deceptively innocent signs of courtly love in Lancelot and Guinivere and

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<sup>1</sup>Larry D. Benson, "Le Morte Darthur," in R. M. Lumiansky and Hershel Baker, eds., Critical Approaches to Six Major English Works: Beowulf through Paradise Lost (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968), p. 114.

<sup>2</sup>Edmund Reiss, Sir Thomas Malory (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1966), p. 100.

<sup>3</sup>Charles Moorman, "Courtly Love in Malory," ELH, 27 (1960), 169.

the actual adultery of Tristran and Isolde. Saying that the account pictures the Round Table at its highest point--the oath being fulfilled, a sense of well-being and security, and a type of happy love, Wilfred L. Guerin sees the tale as exemplifying the flowering of chivalry.<sup>4</sup> While each of these interpretations discloses ideas which are at work in "The Tale of Gareth," none alone penetrates Malory's intent fully, partially because they do not adequately integrate the implications of structure into thematic analysis.<sup>5</sup> Previously, the structural segments of "The Tale of Gareth" have been shown to coincide generally with Frye's outline of the quest. The numerous episodes in which Gareth demonstrates his prowess and virtue before the pathos, the battle with the Red Knight of the Red Lands, provide a definite example of the agon or preliminary adventures. Gareth's self-imposed exile from Arthur's court approximates the sparagmos, and his triumphant return and wedding closely resemble Frye's anagnorisis. However, as was previously noted, these headings do not sufficiently account for all the episodes of the romance. The events of the narrative are determined primarily by the need for Gareth to establish his identity as a knight, and each of his adventures moves him closer to the goal of

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<sup>4</sup>Wilfred L. Guerin, "'The Tale of Gareth': The Chivalric Flowering," in R. M. Lumiansky, ed., Malory's Originality: A Critical Study of Le Morte Darthur (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1964), p. 111.

<sup>5</sup>Benson comes closest to incorporating both elements in his analysis, but he does not fully consider the structural relationship of "Gareth" to the Morte Darthur. Benson, p. 119, states that the theme accounts for the shape of the narrative and the proportionateness that unifies it. He sees the structure of "Gareth" as a "carefully wrought pyramidal structure" consisting of two balanced halves.

earning his family name and membership in the Round Table. An additional consideration in an analysis of this romance is the fact that "The Tale of Gareth," unlike Sir Gawain, is part of a larger work. While Sir Gawain is a single, tightly constructed unit, "Gareth" offers implications for the entire Arthurian society as it is revealed in the Morte Darthur. These larger implications will be considered following a discussion of the romance's structure as it relates to the theme.

Although Gareth's reputation eventually places him among the world's best knights, he is mocked and scorned during his first year in Arthur's court, a period that may be termed "pre-quest" since the quest proper (following Frye) begins only with the preliminary adventures. This pre-quest, a phase ignored by Frye in his analysis, is essential for Malory to establish Gareth's character and the situation. Rather than assume a ready-made identity as Gawain's brother and the king's nephew, Gareth chooses to prove himself worthy both of knight-hood and of his family background. Essential to Gareth's plan is that his name not be known. Given the romancer's penchant for correlating name with identity, it could even be said that Gareth does not have an identity until he establishes his worth, a fact well-stated by Reiss--"the nobility is really the identity, and it cannot be taken for granted."<sup>6</sup> This belief produced the tradition of the "fair unknown"; as Benson defines it, the hero must earn his name and show

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<sup>6</sup>Reiss, p. 101.

he is worthy of it and the state it implies before he can reveal it to himself or to others.<sup>7</sup> This line of thought explains why the king is not angered by Gareth's refusal to identify himself. Instead, he marvels that the handsome young man has not yet proven himself and "knowyste nat" his name. Although he is the "goodlyeste yonge man and the fayreste that ever they all sawe,"<sup>8</sup> he enters the court leaning on the shoulders of two men, a detail Reiss sees as symbolizing his weakness and lack of development.<sup>9</sup> With this insight, his request for meat and drink for the coming year in the king's court can be seen as a wish not only for physical nourishment but also for the enrichment of associating with the renowned knights of the Round Table. Later, in explaining his motivation to the damsel Lyonet, Gareth says that "though hit lyst me to be fedde in kynge Arthures courte, I myghte have had mete in other placis" (p. 191), indicating that he sees special benefits to be gained by being in this court rather than any other.

Gareth's need for refinement is evident from his first appearance, because he brings hardship to himself by acting, as Reiss says, "like any common churl and like a man overly concerned with the gross and earthly."<sup>10</sup> He elects to appear as a man of low estate even though

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<sup>7</sup>Benson, p. 115.

<sup>8</sup>Eugene Vinaver, ed., *Malory: Works*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 177. All subsequent citations are from this edition and are indicated by page numbers in parentheses in the text.

<sup>9</sup>Reiss, p. 102.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 102.

he has the means to arrive at Arthur's court in a manner befitting the son of a noble family. His mother, the queen of Orkney, had sent him to Arthur "ryght well armed and horsed and worshypfully besene of his body, and gold and sylver plenté to spende" (p. 210). Perhaps Gareth felt his innate ability would be apparent even through his disguise and would guarantee him a royal reception in his uncle's household. However, although the king charges Sir Kay to provide for the stranger "as though he were a lordys sonne" (p. 178), Kay relegates him to the kitchen. Because of Gareth's apparent lack of concern for nobility either in appearance or behavior, most of the court mock him as "vylane borne," especially Kay who scornfully dubs him Beaumains or "Fayre Handys."<sup>11</sup> When everyone except Gawain and Lancelot ridicules him, Gareth's illusions of inherent nobility are crushed. Nonetheless, exhibiting great patience and humility, Gareth, Malory wrote, "endured all that twelve-monthe and never displeased man nother chylde, but allways he was meke and mylde" (p. 179). Thus, even in this expository pre-quest phase Malory develops his hero's character by introducing the important themes which will highlight his growth in the course of the narrative.

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<sup>11</sup>Studies of the meaning and origin of 'Beaumains' have appeared in the following: Wilfred L. Guerin, "Malory's Morte Darthur, Book VII," Explicator, 20 (1962), 64; Roger Sherman Loomis, "Malory's Beaumains," EMIA, 54 (1939), 656-668; Eugene Vinaver, Malory (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), pp. 3-4; Vinaver, Malory: Works, pp. 746-747; Eugene Vinaver, "A Romance of Gaheret," Medium Aevum, 1 (1932), 157-167. The most plausible explanation of this name has been advanced by Guerin who points to Walter Clyde Curry's observation that medieval knights were expected to have large hands with broad, strong, and square fists. Guerin concludes that Kay mocks the incongruity of a churl having the "Fayre Handys" of a knight, a view that reflects the idea of nobility being revealed in one's physical appearance and ability.



When a nameless damsel appears in Arthur's court to request aid for her besieged sister, Beaumains sees the opportunity to assume a functioning role in society, which for him, a medieval man of noble birth, meant knighthood. Reminding the king of his earlier promise to grant him two gifts in addition to a year's lodging, Beaumains requests the king's permission to undertake the adventure of the damsel and to be knighted by Lancelot. Beaumains sees the quest as being directly his. The phrase "hit belongyth unto me" (p. 180) may be only a conventional expression of romance, but following on Gawain's description of the Red Knight of the Red Land--"I know hym well, for he is one of the perelest knyghtes of the worldis. Men say that he hath seven mennys strength, and from hym I ascapyd onys full hard with my lyff" (p. 179), it could easily indicate Beaumains' desire to prove himself against a foe whose greatness is attested to not only by one of the most valiant of knights but also by the most skillful of his family. With Arthur's approval of the requests, horse and armor appear miraculously for Beaumains. All the court are astonished for "whan he was armed there was none but fewe so goodly a man as he was" (p. 180). Before he can be knighted though, he must prove himself physically capable of knighthood, which he does, opposing Lancelot so strenuously that the renowned warrior "dred hymself to be shamed" (p. 181). As Malory illustrates repeatedly through his portrayal of the ideal knight, genuine knighthood requires nobility of birth as well as prowess. Thus, before Lancelot can knight him, Beaumains must identify himself. Although Lancelot agrees to keep his identity secret, he admits to the inquisitive court that he knew the young knight's true name, saying,



"or ellys I wolde not have yeffen hym the hyghe Order of Knyghthode"  
(p. 201).

The quest proper begins when Beaumains becomes a knight, and each of his succeeding adventures is a step in his education as a knight and in preparation for the culminating test of his warrior qualities against the Red Knight of the Red Lands. Knighthood in Malory's view involved more than martial skills alone, as is evidenced in the code with which Arthur charged the knights of the Round Table:

. . . never to do outorage nother mourthir, and allwayes to fle treson, and to gyff mercy unto hym that askith mercy, uppon payne of forfiture [of their] worship and lordship of kynge Arthure for evirmore; and allwayes to do ladyes, damesels, and jantilwomen and wydowes [socour:] strengthe hem in hir ryghtes, and never to enforce them, uppon payne of dethe. Also, that no man take no batayles in a wrongefull quarell for no love ne for no worldis goodis. (p. 75).

Therefore, Beaumains, having gained the name and outward trappings of a knight, must realize that knighthood does not automatically ensure respect and recognition. To deserve honor, the knight must bear out the paradox that "unless the man be noble and worthy, his strength and prowess are in vain . . . unless the man be an able and strong fighter he cannot be noble."<sup>12</sup> The tests Beaumains meets in his quest form a progression, with each episode requiring the attainment of some new skill or attribute which will place him above the average man and ordinary knight.

Accompanying the damsel to her sister's beseiged castle, Beaumains must struggle to prove himself not only against valiant

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<sup>12</sup>Reiss, p. 104.

warriors but also against antagonistic attitudes, particularly evident in the damsel's hostile behavior toward him. His first adventure is the rescue of a knight from six thieves. While the chivalric code would demand that a knight oppose thieves, they were generally considered churls and not the lofty opponents a knight would anticipate fighting. Numerically, the odds are against Beaumains, but in skill and nobility he is superior. Notably, while his later adventures are often retold to illustrate his prowess this one is only related when it occurs. His second contest is against two brothers who guard the single bridge crossing a great river. Symbolically, this fight signifies Beaumains' actual entry into the world of knightly quests and adventures. The river, in effect, separates the average man from the truly noble. In his next battles against the four brothers who are portrayed as knights of different colors,<sup>13</sup> Beaumains must assert his personal right to be a knight. In his encounter with the Black Knight, as in the following ones with the Green and Red Knights, the damsel Lyonet declares Beaumains' villainy: "Nay, fayre knyght, this is but a kychyn knave that was fedde in kyng Arthures kychyn for alms" (p. 184). The Black Knight believes his duty is to prevent further profaning of the noble order of knighthood by this rogue.

Than sayde the knyght, 'Why commyth he in such aray? For hit is shame that he beryth you company.'

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<sup>13</sup>The significance of Gareth's adventures with these four knights has not been explored in detail. Benson, p. 119, says he can see no reason why the knights are designated by colors.

'Sir, I can not be delyverde of hym, for with me he rydyth magré my hede. God wolde,' seyde she, 'that ye wolde putte hym from me, other to sle hym and ye may, for he is an unhappy knave, and unhappyly he hath done this day thorow myssehappe; for I saw hym sle two knyghtes at the passage of the watir, and other dedis he ded beforne ryght mervaylouse and thorow unhappynesse.'

'That mervayles me,' seyde the Blak Knyght, 'that ony man of worshyp woll have ado with hym.'

'Sir, they knew hym nat,' seyde the damesell, 'and for because he rydyth with me they wene that he be som man of worshyp borne.'

'That may be,' seyde the Blak Knyght; 'howbehit as ye say that he is no man of worshyp borne, he is a full lykly persone, and full lyke to be a stronge man. But this muche shall I graunte you,' seyde the knyght, 'I shall put hym downe on foote, and his horse and harneyse he shall leve with me, for hit were shame to me to do hym any more harme' (p. 184).

Although the older knight does not want to harm Beaumains seriously, Beaumains has not yet learned the virtue of mercy, which is so central to Arthur's code, and fights fiercely until he has killed the Black Knight. However, in his encounter with the Green Knight, he discovers that chivalry demands courtesy and mercy as well as skill in arms. Having recognized that courtesy to a lady is one of the knight's cardinal virtues, he is bound to the damsel's desires with all of a young knight's enthusiasm for and adherence to the rules, and he answers the Green Knight's plea for mercy with the declaration that all the knight's promises "awaylyth the nought but yf my damesell speke to me for thy lyff . . . for I woll nat meke hir wroth, for I woll fulfyllle all that she chargyth me" (pp. 186-187). Beaumains, along with the damsel, must realize that mercy is not only an attribute of nobility, but also that the noble deserve to receive it. This insight strengthens Gareth's character and provides him with a retinue of knights who have sworn their allegiance to him. Like their

brother, the Black Knight, the Green and Red Knights see themselves as defending the honor of knighthood and, moreover, the honor of their family from the attacks of the "second-rate" knight. However, by the time Beaumains encounters the fourth brother, Persaunte of Inde, his reputation is well established among the knights by his prowess and mercy and with the damsel by his courtesy both toward her and the Green and Red Knights. The final test of his ability before meeting the Red Knight of the Red Lands, this fourth battle is undertaken in the true spirit of knightly combat, the type of challenge any knight errant would value, and Beaumains is again the victor. As always, however, the completion of one test only means there is another one to come. To honor the noble warrior, Sir Persaunte sends his daughter to Beaumains' bed; Beaumains' courteous refusal of her favors proves his chastity and establishes that "Truly . . . whatsomever he be he is com of full noble bloode" (p. 193). With the conclusion of this sequence, Beaumains has shown that his nobility is both inherent and achieved, and he is able to disclose his true identity to Persaunte and the damsel.<sup>14</sup>

The earlier tests have shown Beaumains to be a knight accomplished in all the major Arthurian virtues; a victory over the Red Knight of

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<sup>14</sup>Interestingly, during the stop at Persaunte's castle, the damsel's name is revealed for the first time. For her, as for Gareth, the acquiring of an identity requires a measure of growth. Until she recognizes Gareth's nobility, she is nameless, simply called the damsel. Her identity can be known only when she illustrates that she herself is a person of worth. Reiss, p. 105, notes she becomes a "more moderate, tolerant person" as the result of her association with Gareth.

the Red Lands will place him among the greatest of knights, as Sir Persaunte says, "for and ye macche that Rede Knyght ye shall be called the fourth of the world" (p. 194). Ironsyde, the Red Knight<sup>15</sup> is "a full noble knyght, but he is nother of curtesy, bounté, nother jantylnesse; for he attendyth unto nothyng but to murther" (p. 195). Thus, this conflict between the civilized knight and the uncivilized one can be seen symbolically as the pathos as described by Frye: the Red Knight, a disorder symbol, is the counterpart of the archetypal dragon. Drawing attention to the remains of the many knights who have fought him and lost, the Red Knight tries to frighten Beaumains, but the young knight is not one to flee from imminent danger. Besides, he sees himself fighting in the name of Right--"That shamefull syght cawsyth me to have courage and hardynesse ayenst the much more than I wolde have agaynste the and thou were a well-ruled knyght" (p. 198). Beaumains and Ironsyde are evenly matched; the fight is fierce and neither seems to have the upperhand. Finally growing weary, Beaumains falters but is inspired to victory when he is reminded the well-being of lady Lyones depends on him. Showing the ultimate in knightly mercy, he allows the Red Knight to live, being less harsh with him than his deeds merit because the evil he has done has been for the love of a lady. While Gareth excuses the knight's behavior because it stems from l'amour courtois, his advice to the Red Knight is contrary to the courtly tradition.

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<sup>15</sup>The strength of the Red Knight increases with the sun until he has the strength of seven men, and, with his red color, he appears as a sun figure. Little importance is given to this characteristic in the tale; it could easily be a detail carried over from an earlier romance.



'Geff thou so have done,' seyde Bewmaynes, 'mesemyth hit was but waste laboure, for she lovyth none of thy felyshyp, and thou to love that lovyth nat the is but grete foly. For and I undirstoode that she were nat ryght glad of my commynge I wolde be avysed or I dud batayle for hir; but I undirstonde by the segynge of this castell she may forbere thy felyshyp. And therefore wete thy well, thou Rede Knyght, I love hir and woll rescow hir, othir ellys to dye therefore' (p. 197).

His commonsense approach, Moorman notes, is directly opposed to that tenet of courtly love which insists that the true lover press his suit in spite of any rebuffs he might receive,<sup>16</sup> and illustrates that while he has proven his ableness as a warrior, he lacks the refinement of the courtly lover.

Gareth has successfully passed the supreme test of his prowess as a knight, but he learns that the traits which result in victory for a warrior are not sufficient in the realm of love. Still rather naive in the finer points of chivalric tradition, he expects the lady Lyones to receive him in a manner befitting a knight who has fought for her with the "beste bloode" (p. 201) of his body, and he is understandably upset when she refuses to let him even enter her castle. She proposes to receive him only after he is "one of the numbir of the worthy knyghtes" (p. 201), not an unusual request for a courtly lover. But Lyones, unable to maintain the hauteur of her assumed role, is moved by Beaumains' sharp retort to declare poignantly the faithfulness of her love.

'Fayre curteyse knyght,' seyde dame Lyonesse, 'be nat displeased, nother be nat overhasty, for wete you well youre grete travayle nother your good love shall nat be

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<sup>16</sup>Moorman, p. 170.



loste, for I consyder your grete laboure and your hardy-  
 nesse, your bounté and your goodness as me ought to do.  
 And therefore go on your way and loke that ye be of good  
 comferte, for all shall be for your worshyp and for the  
 best; and, pardé, a twelve-monthe woll sone be done.  
 And trust me, fayre knyght, I shall be trewe to you and  
 never betray you, but to me deth I shall love you and  
 none other' (p. 201).

The lady soon reveals what she desires is not further proof of his valor but rather knowledge of his name and family. Lyones' insistence on acquiring this information may seem inconsistent with the preceding concern for establishing nobility by actions; however, Malory is once again showing that Gareth cannot deny his family name. A man cannot depend on his birth for nobility, but the truly noble will recognize and willingly assume the challenge of bearing a widely acclaimed name. Besides requiring Gareth to face up to the burden of his family name, Lyones' request is a return to the anticipated traditions of l'amour courtois. Reiss suggests that the purpose is "not that Gareth must prove himself further but that he must suffer the pangs of love before being rewarded with his lady's hand."<sup>17</sup> However, although their relationship involves courtly traditions, it is not ruled by them, and, as Moorman indicates, it is more direct and frank than most courtly love affairs.<sup>18</sup> Certainly the behavior of the lovers at Gringamore's

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<sup>17</sup>Reiss, p. 103.

<sup>18</sup>Moorman, p. 170.

<sup>19</sup> castle is contrary to l'amour courtois. Upon meeting the disguised Lyones, Gareth immediately falls in love with her, all the while wishing his lady were as fair as this new beauty, and thus breaking the rule of courtly love requiring the lover ever to be faithful to the beloved. Lyones also ignores the tradition that the lady remain aloof when she comes to Gareth's bed. Functioning as a conscience for the young lovers,<sup>20</sup> Lyonet successfully keeps the couple from consummating their love before their marriage.<sup>21</sup> Although Gareth's quest is viewed ethically, rather than religiously, Malory's ideal knight is firmly grounded in Christian virtue, and his life must reflect the Christian

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<sup>19</sup> Roger Sherman Loomis, "The Visit to the Perilous Castle: A Study of the Arthurian Modifications of an Irish Theme," PMLA, 48 (1933), 1000-1035, discusses the events occurring at Gringamore's castle as connected to the motif of the Champion's Bargain and notes that Gareth was originally identified with Gawain.

<sup>20</sup> Moorman, p. 171, note, calls Lyonet a "dea ex machina;" Reiss, p. 108, describes her as a "conscience based on chivalric and Christian ideals;" and Guerin, "'The Tale of Gareth,'" p. 110, says she acts with a "sense of righteousness."

<sup>21</sup> R. T. Davies, "Malory's 'Vertuous Love,'" Studies in Philology, 53 (1956), 459, sees the relationship of Lyones and Gareth as "a fairly typical medieval love affair, which ends for once in marriage." Moorman, p. 171, believes "The Tale of Gareth" is a direct commentary on l'amour courtois, presenting a contrast to the adulterous affairs of Lancelot and Tristan. Robert W. Ackerman, "'The Tale of Gareth' and the Unity of Le Morte Darthur," in James L. Rosier, ed., Philological Essays: Studies in Old and Middle English Language and Literature in Honour of Herbert Dean Meritt (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1970), pp. 196-203, opposes Moorman's thesis that "The Tale of Gareth" attacks courtly love on the grounds that the "hair-breadth escape of Gareth and Lyones from premarital relations" is not on account of their own scruples.

principles of chastity<sup>22</sup> and fidelity, even though they are imposed by an outside force.

Significantly, after Gareth's arrival at Gringamore's castle, he is never again directly addressed as Beaumains, an indication that he has proven he is worthy of his true name. He has earned his own identity and must now only reveal it to Arthur's court. This final section of "The Tale of Gareth," the tournament, falls neatly into Frye's fourth category, the anagnorisis, or the hero's return and recognition. Since his fame precedes him, the tournament, a grand finale to the adventures which have established him as an accomplished knight, is more a demonstration of his ability and nobility than a proof of them. With the help of the knights he has conquered, Gareth takes on all Arthur's knights except Lancelot and wins the honor of the tournament. Even during the tournament, Gareth insists on remaining anonymous, and, when his identity is accidentally discovered, he once more disappears from the court. He then engages in what Benson terms a "series of apparently anti-climactic battles and disguises culminating in a chance meeting with Gawain that somehow serves to bring the story to an end."<sup>23</sup> I suggest, however, that Malory had a definite

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<sup>22</sup>Gareth, in maintaining his chastity, may even anticipate Galahad. Galahad, who becomes the best knight of Arthur's court, seems to add to the Arthurian code the ideal of chastity. This addition perhaps reflects the monastic discipline of such orders as the Knights' Templars. Lancelot is disqualified from the Grail Quest on grounds of unchastity. In comparison, Galahad, a Christ-figure, is free from sin. Possessing the highest spiritual attribute of knighthood, Galahad engages in and successfully completes the Grail Quest.

<sup>23</sup>Benson, p. 113.

purpose in drawing the story to a close in this manner. First, these numerous minor battles illustrate that Gareth will not regard his new prestige as an end in itself but will continue to fulfill the requirements of the Round Table's code and to do his part to restore peace and unity by fighting evil knights and bringing the noble ones into the fellowship of the Round Table. More important to Gareth's effort to gain recognition, though, is his accidental encounter with Gawain. Although he has earned the honor of the world by his successful battles against numerous knights and of Arthur and his court by his admirable performance in the tournament, Gareth is not satisfied until he receives recognition from his own family, specifically from his highly acclaimed brother, Gawain. Only after Gawain overwhelmingly praises his younger brother's deeds--

'I ought of ryght to worshyp you, and ye were nat my brother, for ye have worshipte kynge Arthure and all his courte, for ye have sente mo worshypfull knyghtes this twelve-monthe than fyve the beste of the Rounde Table hath done excepte sir Launcelot' (p. 222)--

does Gareth rejoin Arthur's knights for the joyous celebrations in his honor which mark the advent of the Golden Age of chivalry.

"The Tale of Gareth" is the last story in the Morte Darthur which seems, as one critic notes, "wholly happy,--uninvaded by moral scruples or by the sad recognition of conflicting forces within chivalry itself,"<sup>24</sup> but the seeds of strife and destruction are inherent even in this ideal time. The ominous signs become most apparent

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<sup>24</sup>Vida D. Scudder, Le Morte Darthur of Sir Thomas Malory: A Study of the Book and Its Sources (1917; rpt. New York: Haskell House, 1965), p. 235.

when we consider the possibility that Malory intended the fate of the Round Table to be reflected and foreshadowed in the life of one individual, Gareth. In ventures which very generally parallel Gareth's recognition as a noble knight, Arthur rose to kingship and nobility from the reputation of a "boy of no hyghe bloode borne" (p. 9) and established the Round Table which was to embody the highest ideals of chivalry. In "The Tale of Gareth," although the Round Table is pictured as the epitome of chivalry, both its courtesy and prowess are lacking. King Arthur refuses to send a knight to aid the besieged lady because the damsel will only identify her as her sister. In the tournament, Arthur's knights do not fare well against Gareth and his comrades. In a fight that foreshadows the inner conflict of the Round Table, Gawain and Gareth almost destroy each other. Although this incident is accidental, later Gareth, recognizing Gawain's lack of gentillesse--"for he was evir vengeable" (p. 224), withdraws himself from Gawain's fellowship in favor of Lancelot, a choice suggesting the final destructive rift of the Round Table. After his story has been told, Gareth fades into the background of the Morte Darthur, and the Round Table recedes from the central focus for the tales of Tristram and the Quest of the Holy Grail. Both remain vital, if underdeveloped, links in the narrative and are vulnerable merely by being at the center of an explosive situation. Although there are numerous underlying causes for the fall of the Round Table, Lancelot's accidental slaying of Gareth (Bk. XX, I) is the event that actually precipitates the devastating war which rends Arthur's court into two unreconciliable camps. Gareth embodies the best qualities of the



Round Table and, with his demise, a major cohesive force among Arthur's knights is lost. In the death of this noble knight, Malory gives a presentiment of the impending downfall of Arthur's kingdom.

Throughout the story of Gareth, Malory provides a clear portrait of the ideal knight whose life reveals a sincere dedication to the code of the Round Table. Each episode is designed to illustrate the growth and refinement of Gareth in all aspects of knightly endeavor. In "The Tale of Gareth," Malory depicts Gareth's efforts to earn his inherited position in Arthur's court through his personal accomplishments rather than resting on the laurels of his family. His adventures form a progression that allows the reader to witness the changes that occur as Beaumains the kitchen knave becomes Gareth, a member of Arthur's renowned Round Table. Although he does not possess the heavenly virtue of Galahad and the other Grail knights or the earthly perfection of Lancelot, Gareth finds a middle way--a believable and human combination of the spiritual and courtly aspects of knighthood. The distinction is most apparent in the three knights' different attitudes toward love. Lancelot typifies courtly love carried to its ultimate fulfillment in his adulterous relationship with Guinivere. On the other hand, the celibacy of Galahad is representative of a spiritual marriage to Christ and the Church as Galahad pursues the Grail Quest with a single-minded purposeness. The only happily married knight in Arthur's court, Gareth is morally transitional between the two extremes represented by Lancelot and Galahad. The chaste (eventually married) love of Gareth borrows from both the courtly tradition and the Christian ethic to achieve, from the medieval point of view, an upward progression from



the adulterous relationship of Lancelot and Guinivere. By merging the human and spiritual traits of chivalry, Gareth becomes, in the words of Guerin, the "clearest manifestation"<sup>25</sup> of the code. Malory pictures in him the model representative of chivalry, able to reconcile the conflicting faces of knighthood and giving a glimpse of what might have been had others shared his devotion. In Arthur's charge to his knights, Gareth does not see an impossible standard to follow blindly, but a viable system to adopt as a way of life. Obeying the spirit as well as the letter of the chivalric rules, Gareth becomes a knight beloved and admired by his fellows, but destined to die in the internal conflict that racks Arthur's knights. The greatest tribute to Gareth is spoken by Lancelot, who is his ideal, whose love dooms him, and whose hand destroys him:

'Be my hede,' seyde sir Launcelot, 'he ys a noble knyght and a myghty man and well-brethed; and yf he were well assayed,' seyde sir Launcelot, 'I wolde deme he were good inow for ony knyght that beryth the lyff. And he ys jantill, curteyse and ryght bownteuous, meke and mylde, and in hym ys no maner of male engynne, but playne, faythfull an trew' (p. 638).

In life, Gareth is the fulfillment of the knightly vision and, in death, the tragic victim of the system he served so well.

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<sup>25</sup> Guerin, "'The Tale of Gareth,'" p. 108.

## CONCLUSION

The preceding analyses of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and "The Tale of Gareth" illustrate that the author's conception of his story and his purpose in writing it are two of the most important factors in determining the structure of a romance. As Donald R. Howard has shown,<sup>1</sup> the dominant force in medieval society was the Christian Church, and its influence pervaded every facet of life. The growth of chivalry was especially affected by Christian thought; the knight was frequently considered a Christian soldier, and the knightly qualities most desired stemmed from Christian virtues. In attempting to portray ideal knights, the Gawain poet and Malory indicated the extensive influence of Christianity. Although neither romance was intended solely as a didactic statement of the proper life style, there can be little doubt that both authors desired to depict social, moral, and religious ideals. Both authors look back to the reign of Arthur in its heyday for models of knightly excellence, but both also see signs of moral weakness that eventually doom Arthur and his court.

In Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Gawain's contemporaries see him as the perfect knight who possesses both the Christian and secular virtues of knighthood--piety, courtesy, generosity, love of

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<sup>1</sup>Donald R. Howard, The Three Temptations: Medieval Man in Search of the World (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 39.

fellowman, and purity. Although Gawain feels his quest is just another knightly adventure, he learns differently when the Green Knight reveals the actual purpose of his adventures has been to try Arthur and his court and his own important test occurred in his dealings with Bertilak's lady. Brought face to face to the conflict between the Christian and secular aspects of knighthood, Gawain discovers that while physical prowess and outward appearances are sufficient to gain the respect of most people, for the Christian knight, total integrity is required. As the noble knight would not think of shirking his duty in battle, neither can he resort to deceit. The knight must live up to his noble calling in every way. By passing quickly over the more typical, conventional parts of Gawain's quest in which he is tested in a physical way to concentrate on the tests of his moral character, the Gawain poet emphasizes that the knight's inner virtue is what finally determines his worth, not only as a knight but also as a human being.

Malory was also concerned with the need for the knight to demonstrate his nobility of mind and spirit in addition to proving his ability as a warrior. While the hero of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight has an established reputation, Gareth is the young man setting out to gain recognition. He arrives in the court a nameless stranger, seeking only a place to stay. Thus, not only must Gareth prove his nobility as a knight, but he must also demonstrate that he is a person who is able and worthy to be knighted. The adventures of Gareth which Malory narrates are necessary to show the development of a young man who moves from anonymity and even mockery to become one of the four best and most respected knights in the world. The episodes described

form a progression with each one furnishing a new skill or virtue necessary in Gareth's upward climb.

Although both Gawain and "Gareth" are concerned with the development of the total person (or knight), the emphasis of each differs. Gawain's quest is more of a spiritual or moral undertaking, even though he does not realize the level on which he is being tested until the test is over. While Gawain fails on his quest, his failure is not a result of his inability to perform the physical tasks required of him. His lack of success stems totally from a moral weakness; he is willing to break a promise and to deceive his host to save his own life. However, as is demonstrated by his refusal to accept the servant's suggestion that he flee the appointed meeting with the Green Knight, Gawain's conscience will not allow him to perform an obvious act of cowardice, even to escape death. Not until the Green Knight accuses him of concealing the magical girdle does Gawain recognize his error, and then he is overcome by his sense of guilt. The Green Knight and Gawain's fellows, however, continue to honor him as a knight above all others. They realize, as Gawain does not, that he has come as near perfection as any human being can; for, in Christian doctrine, absolute perfection is an attribute of God alone. Perhaps as Spearing suggests Gawain's experiences do not have a lasting effect on him but simply leave him sadder without being much wiser.<sup>2</sup> The same pride which compelled him to conceal the gift of the girdle may well be the force which insists to him that he should have avoided that one mistake.

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<sup>2</sup>A. C. Spearing, The Gawain-Poet: A Critical Study (Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 230.

Whatever his motivation, Gawain is haunted by his failing, and his future life will certainly be affected by his realization that perfection is an impossible goal and that the ultimate standard is based on inner virtue rather than external appearance.

In contrast, Gareth's tests occur primarily on a physical level, although he must gain certain internal qualities, such as courtesy and mercy, to achieve honor. The conflicts in which he engages are typical knightly endeavors with clearly identified opponents and no hidden tests. The standard toward which he aims is the ideal set forth in the code of the Round Table and in the lives of renowned knights, specifically Gawain and Lancelot. Even though the attainment of this goal requires moral and spiritual virtues, the model to which Gareth is compared is a secular one, and therefore, perfection is a possibility. Malory clearly sees the ideal knight as uniting the spiritual and worldly facets of chivalry, and, in Gareth, the best of both is found.

While the author's idea of the story and his purpose are the determining factors in selecting and ordering the events of the narrative, I do not suggest it is the only basis for analyzing the structure of a romance. As was demonstrated in the first chapter, Frye's analysis of the quest motif as exhibiting a mythic pattern offers a valid, although not infallible, scheme of romance structure. Closely related to the idea of a pre-existing mythic pattern is the influence from the use of earlier sources. The story of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and those related by Malory in the Morte Darthur, as well as the other romances of the medieval period, originally

existed as part of an oral literature passed from one generation to the next. Very probably some details and events were included in the versions we have solely because they were present in the earlier sources. Another factor in determining the structure of a romance, one that cannot be overlooked, is the primary purpose of all literature, to entertain. Certainly, the Gawain poet and Malory developed their romances along the lines they felt would most appeal to the people's desire to hear about the exciting adventures of King Arthur's knights. Thus, each of these factors--the mythic pattern, earlier sources, and the desire to entertain--unites with the author's conception of the story and its purpose to determine the structure of a romance. While the author's preconceived ideas of his intention exert the most influence on the structure, all the factors are interrelated and interdependent. Functioning together, these elements merge to form the whole, romances of a timeless quality which have and will continue to entertain readers as they also convey their unique system of values.



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